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Bad Options in the Mideast

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Nothing is very clear about the political situation in the Mideast, except one thing: There are no good options. In such terrible moments as this, we seek guidance, perspective, a light in the darkness. Before we even set our minds to thinking about what should be done, it is worthwhile, always worthwhile, looking to history to see what lessons it affords.

?These are the tormenting dilemmas upon which mankind has throughout its history been so frequently impaled. Final judgment upon them can only be recorded by history in relation to the facts of the case as known to the parties at the time, and also as subsequently proved. There is, however, one helpful guide, namely, for a nation to keep its word and to act in accordance with its treaty obligations to allies. This guide is called honour. It is baffling to reflect that what men call honour does not correspond always to Christian ethics. Honour is often influenced by that element of pride which plays so large a part in its inspiration. An exaggerated code of honour leading to the performance of utterly vain and unreasonable deeds could not be defended, however fine it might look. Here, however, the moment came when Honour pointed the path of Duty, and when also the right judgment of the facts at that time would have reinforced its dictates.?

These were Churchill's comments upon the tragedy at Munich. They were written with hindsight, but also with insight. It is baffling indeed that what we call honor is often at odds with Christian ethics. But, the key point, I think, is that when ominous circumstances loom, when danger lurks, when violence has begun yet there is still the hope the violence might be contained, at such a moment it is good to remember things like treaty obligations. Why? Because treaties, and alliances, and long-standing mutual commitments, are undertaken for sound reasons, with much deliberation, when the circumstances were not crushing. They reflect something deeper than the geo-strategic interest of the moment.

Along the political border between Israel and Gaza, there is much violence, but there is no doubt where the sympathies of the American nation belong. We may feel deeply for the plight of the Palestinians, indeed we must feel their pain deeply, but we cannot forget that on the afternoon of September 11, 2001, there were celebrations in the streets of Palestine and there was wailing and mourning in Tel Aviv. I hope and I pray that the IDF will not send ground troops across the border, but I know that if a loved one of mine had done something bad, and was to face a criminal justice system, in Israel that loved one would receive judicial treatment more akin to what we receive in the West, but on the other side of the border, his or her fate would be determined by less impartial canons of justice and legal propriety. Certainly, the rights of women, the rights of gay men and women, the rights of everyone but those who flirt with terror, are guaranteed and enshrined in Israel in a way they are not in any other country in that part of the world. Finally, we know that Israel has a tradition of democratic governance, that whatever one thinks of Bibi Netanyahu, he serves at the pleasure of the Knesset, and can be removed by a free vote of that body.

Over at Commonweal, I read this: "Each side terrorizes the other's civilians in order to justify the continuing attacks." That is not exactly the case. Hamas sends rockets into civilian targets as a matter of policy. Hamas also places its own rocket launchers, and ammunitions' depots, and other military hardware in schools and hospitals and homes so that should the Israelis attack a building whence a rocket came, the Israeli attack will kill some children too, generating sympathy abroad and rage on the Arab Street. This must be understood: Hamas' military deliberately hides behind its women and children, just as their sponsor Iran once sent teenage boys in front of the tanks to clear minefields in the Iran-Iraq War. This is cowardly, to be sure, but it is not stupid. Our friends at Commonweal fall for it every time, suggesting a moral equivalence between the attacks of Hamas and the IDF that does not exist. Israel tries to avoid civilian casualties, but that is hard to do when your military opponent keeps putting civilians in front of his troops as a shield. If you had any doubt as to the relative moral claims of the combatants, this long-standing policy of Hamas should be sufficient to tell you where the interests of human decency can be found.

The Arab Spring has changed the political landscape. For the first time in history, Egypt, too, has a democratically elected president who can legitimately sit down with Netanyahu as the representative of his people. That may bode ill for the moment, but it can only help in the long-run, for tyrants are uncertain partners in peace. It remains to be seen if Mr. Morsi can shape the public opinion of his nation, lead them to understand that peace with Israel is a necessary precondition for their own flourishing, and if he can help his friends in Gaza to see that too. The U.S. government should make abundantly clear to him that there will be consequences if he connives with the murderous Hamas government in Gaza at the expense of peace. Meanwhile, we must double down on efforts to support the newly born regimes in Libya and Tunisia as well. Democracy is not a panacea, to be sure, but it is an essential first step towards any resolution of the tensions in that region.

The Mideast has also been changed by the detritus of the U.S. war in Iraq. I was more ambivalent about that war than most of my colleagues here at NCR. I had wished the U.S. government had defended the Kurds and the Shia who rebelled against Saddam Hussein after the first Gulf War, but we did not. What finally persuaded me that the second Iraq War was a mistake was no moral argument, nor any appeal to international law. No, what persuaded me was a colder argument put forward by one of my heroes, General Wesley Clark. During the debate preceding the Iraq War, Clark noted that no matter how that invasion of Iraq turned out, it would strengthen Iran. And so it did. Hamas to the southwest of Israel, and Hezbollah to the north, both threaten the security of our closest ally with weapons and funding sent by Tehran. And, worse than weapons and funds, both Hamas and Hezbollah have been nurtured in their fanaticism by the Iranian mullahs too. The bloodshed in Syria also has Iranian fingerprints. So, there is something more than a little ironic, and more than a little revolting, to find myself lectured nightly on Fox

News by the likes of John McCain, Donald Rumsfeld, and John Bolton about how and why the Obama administration should have acted differently in response to the Arab Spring.

Lost in the noise of missiles crashing, and the swirling, bizarre fascination with the sex life of David Petraeus, was the revelation that one of the reasons our government's spokespeople were a bit vague about what did and did not cause the attack on our consulate in Benghazi was that the government did not want to tip-off those they already suspected of the attack that we were on to them. When Republicans first started attacking President Obama on this issue, I mentioned precisely this point, that the government, like a local police department, sometimes releases some information but not other information, because it wants the perp to think he has gotten away with it. Sadly, some Republicans are still ranting about Benghazi. There are questions to be asked and answered to be sure. But, there was something dishonest, and worse, about the pre-election attacks on the President over the handling of the raid on Benghazi.

In any event, there are no good options in the Mideast right now. But, like Churchill, I think that we should think first about honoring our alliances. We are allies with Israel for reasons that run deeper than geo-strategy. We are allies with Israel because their society and culture shares the values of the West in ways the society and culture of their enemies do not. We are allies with Israel because their politics looks like our politics, contentious but free, noisy but democratic, concerned with the well-being of its citizenry, committed to the ideals of justice and a shared national life, characterized by the institutions of a free society, a free press, universal franchise, the education of women, the right to organize and to petition the government. I have my share of disagreements with this policy or that, especially as regards the issue of settlements in the West Bank. But, when I look to the Mideast, I know which side is my friend and which side would cut my throat if it had the chance. That is not a bad place to start thinking about our options, no matter how bad those options are.

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